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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to demonstrate that abusing parents differ from nonabusing parents in personality variables, the Michigan Screening Profile of Parenting was administered to six groups of mothers (n=100): adjudicated abuser, spouses of adjudicated abusers, mothers convicted of child neglect, nonabusing mothers from a college student population, nonabusing mothers from a middle socioeconomic level, and nonabusing mothers from a lower socioeconomic level. Among findings were that in all of the cases, the first three groups scored at levels of higher risk than did the latter three groups, while the abusers scored at the highest-risk levels throughout. (Author/SBH)

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PARENTAL PERSONALITY FACTORS IN CHILD ABUSE

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Abstract

In an attempt to demonstrate that abusing parents differ from non-abusing parents in personality variables, the Michigan Screening Profile of Parenting was administered to six groups of mothers: (1) adjudicated abusers, (2) spouses of adjudicated abusers, (3) mothers convicted of child neglect, (4) non-abusing mothers from a college student population, (5) non-abusing mothers from a middle socioeconomic level, and (6) non-abusing mothers from a lower socioeconomic level. Major differences occurred when comparison was made of one or more of the first three groups with one of the latter three groups. The groups differed significantly on six factor-analyzed cluster categories: (1) relationship to one's own parents, (2) tendency to becoming upset and angry, (3) tendency toward isolation and loneliness, (4) expectations of one's own children, (5) inability to separate parental and child feelings, and (6) fear of external threat and control. In all of the cases, the first three groups scored at levels of higher risk than did the latter three groups, while the abusers scored at the highest-risk levels throughout. It is suggested that a therapist who helps a parent develop the ability to maintain equanimity under stress, by helping reduce deviations from the norm in characteristics related to abuse potential, is ultimately helping reduce actual abusive behavior.

Parental Personality Factors in Child Abuse

With the growing emphasis in the literature on the fact that the causes of child abuse are multiple and interactive, many therapists who deal with parental personality and attitudinal variables are made to feel as if they are engaging in a futile effort (D'Agostino, 1975; Smith, 1975). Although many new and exciting identification and treatment programs for child abuse abound throughout the country (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1975, 1976), very little encouragement has been given to the therapist who does not have easy access to the new interdisciplinary treatment programs and who, in many instances, remains the sole therapeutic agent for a particular set of families (Steele, 1975). The problem is viewed as sufficiently complex that an individual therapist who deals solely with parental attitudes is often discouraged. It is the purpose of this study to demonstrate that parental personality and attitude are important factors in the etiology of child abuse. Such a demonstration can give hope to the therapist that his efforts in dealing with the parental personality are aimed in a profitable direction and that he or she can be effective in reducing potential for abuse.

It is not our intent to suggest that factors of parental background or inadequacy are sole determinants of child abuse. The fact is that the causes of child abuse are multiple and interactive; there is no single type of child abuser nor a single causative factor as sufficient explanation of abuse (Spinetta and Rigler, 1972). Emphasis on parental personality is in no way meant to detract from these other factors. Rather, it is suggested that helping the parent to develop the ability to maintain equanimity under

stress is directly related to situational variables, and can be of central value in the rehabilitative or preventive process.

It is in the broader context of situational variables that we ask the question: why is it that the majority of parents do not abuse their children? Although in the socially and economically deprived segments of the population there is generally a higher degree of the kinds of stress factors found in abusing families, the great majority of deprived families do not abuse their children. Why is it that most deprived families do not engage in child abuse, though subject to the same economic and social stresses as those families who do abuse their children? Is there an actual difference between the types of stresses encountered by abusing parents and non-abusing parents within the same socioeconomic level (Gil, 1970, 1976), or is the difference rather in the parents' manner of approaching the stress situation (Kent, 1976; Smith, 1975; Spinetta and Rigler, 1972; Young, 1976)? We hold the latter position. When one takes into account the fact that some well-to-do as well as middle class families also engage in child abuse, then one must look for the causes of child abuse beyond mere socioeconomic stress. The problem of etiology remains insoluble at the demographic level alone.

The present study is an attempt to demonstrate that however one might explain the particular circumstances that helped shape the parents' personality, abusing parents differ from non-abusing parents in attitudinal and personality variables.

Method

Instrument

In 1972, Schneider, Helfer, and Pollack disclosed efforts underway to design and validate a questionnaire with the goal of uncovering parents who have a potential to abuse their small children. They based their

questions on their clinical experience, which suggested that parents who abuse their small children reported more severe physical punishment in their own childhood, more anxiety about dealing with their children's problems, more concern about being alone and isolated, more concern with criticism, and higher expectations for performance in their children than did non-abusers. After several years of analysis and validation, they published, first, a 74-item and then a 50-item instrument, originally entitled Survey on Bringing Up Children (Schneider, Hoffmeister, and Helfer, 1976). The instrument has since been renamed the Michigan Screening Profile on Parenting (Helfer, Schneider, and Hoffmeister, 1977).

Although the questionnaire has not yet been sufficiently validated to be of use as a legally valid criterion in decisions regarding child placement or parental readiness to resume parenting functions, it has been shown to be capable of differentiating attitudes both regarding child rearing and regarding self-awareness and self-control functions in the parents.

With the permission of Helfer, the present experimenter administered the questionnaire to several groups of parents, as discussed below, to see: (1) whether abuse-potential cluster-categories similar to those found by Helfer and associates could be validated in a local sample, and (2) whether scores based on the locally factor-analyzed categories could sort out abusing from non-abusing parents.

Subjects

As is typical of parents who come to the attention of public agencies (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglec, 1975), the parents referred to the participating agencies were from the lower socioeconomic levels. The use of such parents in the present study is not meant to suggest that abuse takes place only at the lower socioeconomic levels. It does not (Spinetta

and Bigler, 1972). Similarly, although more women than men have been found to abuse their children (Gelles, 1973; Gil, 1970; Smith, 1975), child abuse is not an act solely of the mother. However, the questionnaire was administered only to women, to insure non-confounding by differences in child-rearing attitudes between men and women.

Subjects were chosen in the following manner. The participating agencies agreed to administer the questionnaire to all of the mothers currently under their jurisdiction as active cases. The questionnaire was administered to: (1) adjudicated abusers, (2) spouses of adjudicated abusers, and (3) parents convicted of child neglect. The parents in these categories were chosen with the following criteria: (a) the child was under five years of age, and (b) court adjudication had been finalized, so that parents would not feel that answers would affect the placement of thier child or decisions regarding their own disposition. In this manner, workers were able to insure that responses to the questionnaire were given as honestly as possible.

For purposes of comparison and contrast, the questionnaire was also administered to groups of parents who were non-abusers, with children under five years of age. The following groups were tested: (4) non-abusing mothers from a college-student population, whose children were in a day-care center because one or both parents were in school, (5) non-abusing mothers from a middle socioeconomic level, whose children were in a pre-school, not because of necessity, but through express parental wish, and (6) non-abusing mothers from a lower socioeconomic level, with children in a pre-school because the mother was working. Group 6 was chosen to match as closely as possible the educational, occupational, and socioeconomic status of groups 1, 2, and 3. Group 4 was chosen because it was similar to groups 1, 2, and 3 in financial status, but not in terms of education or potential occupation. Group 5,

different in terms of education, occupation and financial status, and the most representative of the population as a whole, was chosen to test possible class difference in responding.

The samples consisted of the following numbers: (1) adjudicated abusers, 7; (2) spouses of abusers, 9; (3) parents convicted of neglect, 13; (4) non-abusing mothers from a college population, 15; (5) non-abusing mothers from a middle socioeconomic level, 15; and (6) non-abusing mothers from a lower socioeconomic level, 41.

The purpose of the study was explained in detail to the respective supervisors, the agency officials in groups 1-3, and the day-care administrators and teachers in groups 4-6. Because of the sensitive nature of the accusation of child abuse and neglect, and to prevent socially-desirable responses, parents were not told specifically that the survey's ultimate purpose was to differentiate abuse-potential. Rather, parents were asked if they wished to take part in a survey on attitudes in bringing up children, conducted by the University to learn how parents viewed child-rearing. In accord with HEW guidelines, parents were promised that the results would remain anonymous, and that any parent who wished would be given the overall results upon completion of the study.

All of the parents approached in groups 4 and 5, without exception, filled out the survey as requested. Of the parents approached in group 6, all but three (93%) filled out the survey. The parents in groups 1-3 were approached by assigned workers who had built up a rapport, and were told that this survey would not only aid the University by the overall results, but might be of therapeutic aid to the specific worker in each case. Each worker was asked to screen out those parents who would be unduly threatened by the questionnaire, those who might be tempted to answer with socially

desirable responses, and those whose cases were still pending for court completion. The workers did not receive any refusals from the selected cases. The final small sample obtained thus represents responses from parents who were motivated to fill out the questionnaires as honestly as possible. Comments from each worker on each case attested to the honest efforts of the parents who made up the final samples in groups 1-3. It is our distinct belief that the final sample represents the cases most amenable to treatment. There is no reason to suspect that our sample represents the most severe of the abusers. On the contrary, workers' case records show that our final sample is on the conservative side of the abuse-potential continuum in the agencies' overall abuser population. Thus, any differences that appear between our abuser and our non-abuser groups would appear at least equally as strong in the general abuser population of the agencies in question. With the questionnaire aimed toward being of eventual use as an aid to the therapist in sorting out areas of weakness, honest cooperation of the parents was deemed essential. In addition, honest cooperation in each of our six study groups minimizes confounding that would appear if the groups differed in willingness to participate.

Results

A verimax rotated factor analysis of the responses to the questionnaires was conducted by the experimenter. The six clusters of variables closely resemble the high-abuse-potential categories of Helfer and Associates. The six resultant clusters of the present analysis are: (1) relationship to one's own parents (=PARENTS), (2) tendency to becoming upset and angry (=CONTROL), (3) tendency toward isolation and loneliness (=AFFILIATION), (4) expectations of one's own children (=EXPECTATIONS), (5) inability to separate parental and child feelings (=SYMBIOSIS), and (6) fear of external threat and control

(=THREAT).

With these six factor-analyzed cluster-categories as a basis, a six-column scoring form was devised, with direction of scoring set so that the higher score on each cluster represents abuse potential. Total raw scores for each subject were determined for each of the six cluster-categories.

A 1 X 6 analysis of variance was performed for the six groups for each of the six abuse-potential categories. Table 1 gives the means and standard deviations for scores in each of the abuse-potential categories, for each subject group. Table 2 gives the results of the analysis of variance for each of the six categories.

(Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here.)

Scores on each of the six abuse-potential categories showed that significant differences existed among the six groups. The resultant F on the first abuse-potential category, relationship to one's own parents, was 4.55, significant at the .001 level. The resultant F of 6.70 on the second abuse-potential category, tendency to becoming upset and angry, was significant at the .001 level. The resultant F on the third category, tendency toward isolation and lonliness, was 7.53, significant at the .001 level. The resultant F on the fourth category, expectations of one's own children, was 4.20, significant at the .001 level. The resultant F on the fifth category, inability to separate parental and child feelings, was 3.79, significant at the .01 level. The resultant F of 13.92 on the sixth abuse-potential category, fear of external threat and control, was significant at the .001 level.

A posteriori tests using the Scheffé method were conducted for each of the abuse-potential clusters. Significant differences were found as follows. Group 1 (abusers) significantly differed from group 5 (middle-class non-abusers) in abuse-potential clusters 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6. Group 1 significantly

differed from groups 4 and 6 in abuse-potential clusters 2, 3, and 6.

Group 2 (spouses of abusers) significantly differed from group 5 in abuse-potential clusters 2, 3, 4, and 6.

Group 3 (neglecters) significantly differed from group 5 in abuse-potential clusters 1, 2, 5, and 6. Group 3 significantly differed from groups 4 and 6 in abuse-potential clusters 2, 5, and 6.

The Scheffe a posteriori test showed that the major differences in each of the six abuse-potential categories occurred when comparison was made of one or more of the first three groups (abusers, abusers' spouses, and neglecters) with one of the latter three groups (non-abusers). The greatest differences occurred when each of the first three groups was compared to the fifth group (middle-class non-abusers). In each of the abuse-potential categories, group 5 scored at the lowest level. Group 4 (college-student non-abusers) and group 6 (lower-socioeconomic-level non-abusers) were the next lowest in abuse-potential, scoring almost identically throughout. Although the fifth group scored lowest on all of the categories, the other two non-abuser groups scored at a level not significantly higher. In contrast, the abusers scored at the highest-risk level in all but one of the abuse-potential categories.

Discussion

The Michigan Screening Profile on Parenting was able to differentiate between abusing and non-abusing mothers on personality and attitudinal variables. The empirically derived set of abuse-potential categories proved useful in significantly differentiating abusing from non-abusing mothers within the same socioeconomic level in three areas: the tendency to becoming upset and angry, feelings of isolation and loneliness, and the fear of external threat and control. The abusing mothers differed significantly

from non-abusing mothers in a middle socioeconomic level in the same categories, and additionally in their relationship to their own parents, both past and present, in having higher than normal expectations for their young children's performance, and in failing to separate their own feelings from those of their children. Although not at a significant level, abusing mothers differed from non-abusing mothers in the same socioeconomic level in the latter categories as well. Neglecting parents and spouses of abusers were also shown to be weak in the six abuse-potential categories.

Personality and attitudinal factors do make a difference. Abusing mothers differ from non-abusing mothers in areas of attitude and personality that have been clinically related to potential for abuse (Colman, 1975; Corey, Miller and Widlack, 1975; Kent, 1976; Paulson, et al., 1974; Smith, 1975; Spinetta and Rigler, 1972; Steele, 1975; Tracy and Clark, 1974; Walters, 1975). The fact that neglecting mothers and spouses of abusers also scored high on the abuse-potential categories demonstrates the power of the test in pointing to weaknesses in parental personality and attitudes that can affect the very parenting role itself, regardless of whether the result is actual physical abuse, neglect of the child, or passively allowing one's spouse to abuse the child. Intervention and direction is called for in each case.

As stated above, there is no suggestion made that factors of parental inadequacy and personality weakness are sole determinants of child abuse. Certainly, those involved in the care of the abusing parent must continue to relieve the family as much as possible of overwhelming situational stresses. However, personality does play a role. The therapist who helps the parent develop the ability to maintain equanimity under stress can be of immense aid in the rehabilitative or preventive effort.

One must caution that the questionnaire cannot be used as a legally valid criterion sorting out abusing from non-abusing parents, since false positives have been shown on occasion (Schneider, Hoffmeister and Helfer, 1976) and since false negatives can appear with those parents who refuse to answer the questions honestly. It is possible to fake answers by giving socially desirable responses. However, for those parents in a therapeutic situation who respond to the questionnaire with an honest desire to be helped, the responses can help point to weaknesses in areas that have been clinically shown to relate to potential for abuse. A therapist who directs his interventive and preventive efforts toward the amelioration of parental attitudes, both attitudes toward the self and toward the child, is not, as Alby (1975) suggests, misdirecting his energies, but is rather helping reduce deviations from the norm in characteristics related to abuse potential and, hopefully, is ultimately helping reduce actual abusive behavior.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations

CLUSTERS	GROUPS 1 (Abusers)	2 (Spouses)	3 (Neglect)	4 (College)	5 (Middle)	6 (Lower)
1 (PARENTS) m=45.9	m=57.4 SD=14.7	m=48.7 SD= 9.4	m=53.3 SD=10.3	m=44.9 SD=11.6	m=37.7 SD=10.2	m=44.3 SD=10.3
2 (CONTROL) m=18.4	m=25.4 SD= 9.6	m=22.2 SD= 7.6	m=22.8 SD= 7.3	m=17.7 SD= 4.0	m=14.1 SD= 3.8	m=16.7 SD= 4.7
3 (AFFILIATION) m=23.6	m=31.9 SD= 8.2	m=26.9 SD= 5.3	m=25.9 SD= 4.0	m=22.5 SD= 4.2	m=19.9 SD= 3.8	m=22.5 SD= 4.8
4 (EXPECTATIONS) m=30.7	m=39.1 SD=18.6	m=37.3 SD=11.7	m=34.3 SD=10.7	m=28.7 SD= 7.8	m=22.3 SD= 6.3	m=30.0 SD= 8.8
5 (SYMBIOSIS) m=16.2	m=17.3 SD= 5.1	m=16.2 SD= 2.3	m=19.2 SD= 2.9	m=14.9 SD= 2.1	m=14.5 SD= 2.7	m=16.2 SD= 3.3
6 (THREAT) m=45.2	m=61.3 SD=16.5	m=52.6 SD=12.9	m=57.4 SD=10.8	m=40.7 SD= 8.7	m=29.3 SD= 5.7	m=43.9 SD=10.5

Table 2

Analysis of Variance

		df	MS	F	p
1 (PARENTS)	Between	5	527.5	4.55	0.001
	Within	90	116.1		
2 (CONTROL)	Between	5	213.5	6.79	0.001
	Within	90	31.5		
3 (AFFILIATION)	Between	5	177.3	7.53	0.001
	Within	90	23.5		
4 (EXPECTATIONS)	Between	5	409.3	4.20	0.001
	Within	90	97.5		
5 (SYMBIOSIS)	Between	5	35.9	3.79	0.01
	Within	90	9.5		
6 (THREAT)	Between	5	1546.3	13.92	0.001
	Within	90	11.1		